

As I drive to Arles I realise I don't know much about the person I'm going to meet. Of course I know his work extensively; he's one of the most prolific photographers in the world, THE interior photographer. For the last 30 years he has photographed everywhere and everyone – for sure the homes of the wealthiest, but also those of the most significant artists of his time. I've also seen his own house in his pictures and his books occupy a central space in my library, but that's about it. I'm scared. Not that I'm shy, but sometimes I feel kind of overwhelmed when I meet someone whose work I respect this much. I imagine it happens to everyone.

So when I arrive to Arles, it's already dark at night. It's the middle of January and the city feels empty, very different from the busy town it is in summer. Some dodgy-looking guys smoke weed in a corner, an old lady walks her dog, but the town looks beautiful and it smells of burning wood. I look for

# FRANÇOIS HALARD

## Learning to see

INTERVIEW BY NACHO ALEGRE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS HALARD

his home with the help of the few directions he's given me. When I find it, I need some time to finally ring the bell after wandering around the building for a while, not daring to call. And finally there I am, sitting at his kitchen with a glass of wine while he cooks a bull bourguignon and tells me his story and the story of the house. We talk for hours, and after our dinner and the wine he shows me the room where I'll sleep and leaves me to my own thoughts.

With the lights off, it's just the moon lighting the rooms and I can't help but wander around in silence imagining I'm an old French aristocrat or a Bohemian artist in the 18th century. A diptych of Cy Twombly's home sits in an easel in the salon next to a Roman bust and I can see a beautiful Schnabel piece down the staircase. I sit down to smoke in an armchair next to my room and I think I understand why this is the place, far from his natural working places, where he's found the right atmosphere to start building his own world with the ethos of an artisan, after 30 years of 'learning to see'.

apartamento - Arles







Yesterday you were telling me how you started.  
I was very young. I wanted to be a photographer, so instead of going skiing, to the beach, on holiday, I was trying to intern with photographers. My mother was an interior decorator and people were shooting at our house all the time, so I managed to be in contact with some of them. I would call photographers who I knew and say 'I have two weeks free. Do you want to have an assistant to help you for nothing?'

How old were you?  
I think I did my first internship at 15. I do remember it was a guy, somebody I met through a friend of my parents. He was doing nudes and I had to oil the girl. That's what my first job as an assistant was.

Not bad for a first job...  
Yeah, but I was so shy. You know, you are with a beautiful girl and she is naked and you have to oil her for hours. I didn't know the photographer, and I came the first day and he said to me 'Okay, do you want to be a photographer?' I said yes. 'You know what? Take the broom and go clean the toilet'.

And then he said, 'Okay, oil up the girl'?  
Yeah, 'Oil the girl.'

What did your parents think about that? You didn't tell them?  
No, I didn't tell them.

And your friends? Mine would have gone crazy if I told them.  
(Laughs) It was funny. And then after oiling the girl, the job was to go into the market and only pick cherries that were the exact colour of a lipstick he'd given me. People were thinking I was crazy at the shop because I was picking each cherry for the right colour. That was my first job: the toilet, the oil and the lipstick.

So how did you begin shooting yourself?  
It was very simple. Since my parents had a beautiful house, I started shooting it. As I told you, sometimes the house was used as a location. That's when I discovered people like Helmut Newton, Jacques Dirand and Karen Radkai doing a portrait of my parents or pictures of the place. Usually when a shoot was happening in the house, I would skip school and watch them. I remember sitting on the staircase of the house and watching them work.

And your first job?  
Marie-Paule Pellé, who was working for Marie Claire at the time, called me and said 'Listen, you have a job tomorrow. You're doing the cover'.

Out of the blue?  
Yeah. I mean, she had seen some work that I did for my parents, and one day she asked me to bring the portfolio to the magazine. She looked at the pictures and said 'Okay, I will call you back'. And a month later, out of the blue, you go to school, you go back and you're doing the cover. Fine.

Pretty cool...  
Actually I think at the time I was in my first year of art school. I remember now because I was the youngest student at the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs, so when I entered art school I was almost already working. I had done many internships; I had technical knowledge of photography. I was doing the dark room by myself, the negatives, the printing...

And then?  
Then after a couple of years I was so busy I didn't have time to finish school. I was working almost every day. Marie-Paule Pellé was starting a new magazine called *Decoration International*. They were going to make a big, new type of magazine. It was very avant-garde. She said 'Listen, I have a job for you. I need an art director's assistant and I need somebody to work on the layout', so I started there helping in the layout department, helping with photography, doing whatever. I think it's something very important to learn. If you deal with other photographers' pictures, you learn a lot because you have access to many other things, so you don't waste time by imaging what you want to do. It's more direct.

I think so too. That's why I'm here.  
Then after a couple of years working for *Decoration International*, Alex Lieberman from Condé Nast in America called me up and asked me if I wanted to work for Condé Nast magazines. It was for the new version of *House & Garden*. They were redoing the magazine and I joined, so I was part of it at the beginning. And just after that I started to work for *Vanity Fair*, and later *GQ*, which I did non-stop for almost 20 years.

All the while you moved to New York.  
Indeed, but I never moved completely to New









'The house in New York on W 11th Street was the first house I bought in my life. Of all of my homes, it's probably the most bourgeois. You say it's very Ralph Lauren... But it makes sense because at the time I was working for Ralph Lauren, so it was actually paid with Ralph Lauren money'.



'That was my studio in Paris in the late '80s, before moving back to New York. In the 18th arrondissement, Montmartre. I was the neighbour of Françoise Gilot, the mother of Paloma Picasso'.



York. It is a great city I love, but it's like a working city. People take the subway to go to work. I take the plane to go to New York. When the job is more or less finished, maybe I enjoy a couple of free days, but afterwards I go back. So for me it's my working place.

Were you always living with your parents while growing up in Paris or you were living on your own?

God, no. I was living in a *chambre de bonne*. Do you know what that is?

No.

In every bourgeois apartment in Paris on the last floor you have a little *chambre de bonne* – the maid's room. So when I went to school I had a small maid place with the bathroom outside in the corridor. It was furnished with 18th-century pieces of furniture. The big sofa I have there [points at the sofa] is a Louis XV sofa. I bought it when I was living in the *chambre de bonne*. It's funny that some of the objects have followed me along the years, some for 35 years.

So, how was your first home in NYC?

The first time I was in New York I was still attending art school and I had no money and I was staying at the YMCA. So I thought 'Okay, next time I'm back in New York, it's really going to be to work and will be nice'. And I had a friend of mine who had an art gallery on Madison Avenue. He was moving, he had a couple of years left and I took his lease. So my first real apartment was a gallery on Madison Avenue, which was very small but very nice.

When was that? '81?

Maybe '83 or '84 or something like that. Since then I've almost always had a place there. The thing is I never know when I'm going to be in New York or not going to be in New York. It's difficult to plan ahead, so it's nice to have something there so you know that you don't need to go to a hotel. You can leave your stuff or your camera or your clothes or your archive or whatever...

I noticed, looking at your homes – it's like you were going from old to young.

Exactly. Even my photography. I feel more free now at 52 than I was at 28. The house and the way I shoot and the way I put things together and the way I approach things. Yes, it's really amazing actually. And I wish I had the same

freedom I have now back then because I would have done things differently.

Well, the pictures I knew from this house are the ones in your book, *Visite Privée*. But when I saw the house I thought it was much wilder.

Yeah. I really believe that. A house is like a mirror of yourself and the freer you are, it shows in the photography and in the house itself. I know I mix periods and furniture and paintings from different places and times. I have furniture that I bought in France, that went to New York, went back to France, went back to New York, back to France and back to New York again. So it would have cost me less to buy a new one, but I was attached to the one I had. So it's like girls with favourite dresses and they don't want to get rid of them.

Back in those days it was even worse. I used to travel with my own sheets, my own bed, just to recreate something a bit familiar everywhere I was going. I think when you photograph other people's houses, you need to have your own place, otherwise you go crazy.

I guess if you have your kind of life and you travel so much, it doesn't matter that much where your home is.

Yeah, every other month I am here and there. But this is really my house now. This is really my focus and where I am attached.

How do you relate to Arles?

My good friends here are the people from Actes Sud. It's very rare when a big publishing house offers you to do an exhibition and publish a book on your own things. So for me that was really important. That is because of Arles. If I didn't have my house here, maybe I would never have had the opportunity. Because I was really shy for many years to show my own personal stuff; I kept it for myself. It took me a lot of time to get confident enough to show it. I'm a very private person. For a while, I liked to keep my intimate pictures private. I think now it's time to show.

Your commercial work has a very strong value as well. You could call it encyclopaedic.

I don't know. I'm just too much into it. I was very naïve when I started working, so I was never really thinking about any of that until recently. And then it's good actually, because with time you can see the pictures and the subjects that are going to make it. For me, for example, working on the new book with Bada











'After 11th street, I moved to Gansevoort Street. It was very different at the time. I went there because I needed to have a place where I could do fashion shoots. There I was living on top of a club called Hell, so I had to go to sleep before 1am because after that the music wouldn't let me sleep. The neighbourhood was full of prostitutes, drugs, all the kids on crack. That was rough. It was a huge, open space. My neighbour, who had the same place, used to ride his motorbike into the apartment. That was New York at the time. It was a vibe'.



'After living in Gansevoort Street I moved to Paris, to a house in rue de Forez. It used to be the house of Jean Tuitou from A.P.C. That was the same time I started to have the house in Arles'.



Achermann has helped me to finally give a perspective to my own work.

How much do you think you owe to having worked with great art directors like Lieberman or Beda?

A lot, especially doing commercial things or like now, a book. What I like about a very good art director is they do not force you. They subtly push you into the best direction for you. I always did my best work for Alex Lieberman or Fabien Baron or Beda. Art direction now is very different than it used to be.

Why? Because it has to be faster?

Yeah. You know, faster. Now everything is with the computer, so you don't have the people with you on the shoot to give you the energy to go further.

Do you think it's good when they are at the shoot?

Yes, very much. I really like that. I like the challenge of having somebody I respect pushing me forward. Sometimes it's very difficult to know the limits of what you can do in a shoot. It's like the very restrictive timeframe where you spend one day in a place now.

When I was working for Alex at American Vogue, sometimes he would send me for two weeks to do one report and maybe I'd give back five pictures for the Christmas issue and those five pictures had to be, you know, amazing. Now you have to produce 10 pages in one day. That's the reality of it. I was very lucky – I was working in the great days of editors, great days of art directors and great days of magazines, where the goal was to do the best work you could do, to take the most amazing pictures, the most creative things. Now it's very different. I was lucky to be one of the last and the youngest of the old-school folks.

Was it such a different game?

It was. When I started photography, I was never thinking about money, but because nobody was doing what I was doing, I was okay. It's very nice to have a very naïve point of view when you start that young. Otherwise, you take everything for granted and then you play the superstar game and everything, which I was never really interested in. For example, I did work for Saint Laurent for many years. I went to Russia with them. For me, going to Russia with Saint Laurent, doing the couture and doing a full is-

sue of 48 pages on Russia —with no assistant, just by myself— I was thinking it was normal. I was there in my limousine. I had a KGB limousine with the red flag, I could do whatever I wanted, photograph whatever. It was great.

How many homes have you shot?

Maybe 3,000 or 4,000? Something like that.

That's incredible.

It goes quickly if you've worked almost every day since age 20!

Can you really work every day?

Of course. I worked every day for many years. It's tough. I would shoot and then come back home and edit and go back and...

And you had assistants for long?

No, I had assistants in France and I had assistants in New York and I had an assistant in Europe. You know, very often the magazine doesn't want to pay you to fly an assistant. And I like to be flexible. I think if it is only you moving, it's easier. I had places where I had my own studio, but I never had a proper photography studio. I've always been much freer and less attached to an organisation.

So you started by doing interiors and fashion at the same time?

Yes. It's difficult to do both at the same time, but it's fun and challenging. At one point I was thinking I was more personal doing interiors and better at it because there are so many other good fashion photographers. I think I was expressing myself more precisely when I was focusing on what I really loved. I went from interiors to fashion and fashion to interiors.

How did the obsession with Cy Twombly begin?

It came from a friend I had in New York, a stylist I was working with, Jack. He collected some Cy Twombly works and he wanted to buy some more. Then one day with my first paycheck in New York, I bought my first piece of modern art, a Cy Twombly. *Roman Notes*, a lithograph.

Was Twombly established at the time?

No, not too much. It was like 30 years ago. And then one day I was working at American Vogue. I think it was in '87, and I saw the pictures that Deborah de Turberville had shot of Cy Twombly's house in Italy, in Tuscany. And I was kind of mesmerised, very touched by them. Later, when I saw











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'Later I decided to move back to New York. I was renting an apartment on 34th Street but I sold my place in France and bought my house in 145 Sixth Avenue. It was a big loft that I redesigned completely. I destroyed everything: no walls, no ceiling. They used to be 12 little offices that I bought coming back from living in Paris and I tore them down to make one big space'.

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this house in Arles, it was like looking at his place... What I like about this house is that it's very Italian in a way. For example, all the paintings on the living room walls were done by the court painter of Genoa in the 18th century. It reminded me of the decay and the atmosphere of Twombly's place. I feel very attached to that emotional combination.



Cy Twombly in his studio portrayed by François Halard.

Each time, even if it's an assignment, I try to have time and energy to take more pictures, to take pictures I really feel like taking. So if I have to photograph a room I do it the way I'm supposed to, but if I really like it, I will try to take more shots, to capture it as a stolen moment, because I know that it's fantastic to have the opportunity to be in a place where I'm not going to be again.

And from then, how long did it take you to met him?

Ten years. I was very lucky to meet him, to photograph him. It was because I was working with an editor from Condé Nast, Jacques Dehornio, who had been Cy's first gallerist in Italy, that when Cy had his first big retrospective at the MoMA, I was asked by *Vanity Fair* to photograph him. I spent a day with him and that's when everything kind of started.

How is the relationship with the other artists?

Julian Schnabel, for example, would spend some time in Nîmes when I was working at the Maison Carrée, and actually that's where the big prints I have downstairs come from. So I thought of photographing him for *Vogue* and then for myself. I began to shoot artists I was feeling close to in terms of sensibility, as well as artists that have a sense of the living space as well, because Cy, [Miquel] Barceló and Schnabel have a sense of their space being really autobiographical, so really, when you look at the way they live, it tells you a lot about the way they are. It was actually thanks to Cy, Schnabel and the Malaparte house that little by little I really began to build a body of work of personal images of the spaces, which are something more than just a room you are supposed to shoot.

So how did the images of Casa Malaparte come about?

It's a similar story. I knew Beatrice Monti Von Rezori, who had been a friend of Curzio Malaparte since the age of 16. She always told me stories about him and the story of the house, about Capri, but it was very difficult to get any access to it. It took me another 10 years to get in, when the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* sent me to shoot it for the 100th anniversary of Malaparte's birth, and I also took a lot of personal pictures.

Did the change come with Casa Malaparte?

It was really Cy Twombly and Malaparte. That was really a turning point. But it doesn't happen overnight; it's very slow. People now are asking me to take pictures that are more personal than what I did before. That's also why I'm still working. I still care about it. I'm not blasé at all. For example, I stopped fashion photography because I was kind of blasé about it. As soon as I got that feeling, I stopped. I'm very lucky in that sense. Everything I wanted to do, I did it and rather young and rather well. I prefer working well to working successfully. Because one day you say to yourself 'Okay, fine. What makes me really happy?' It's not because you achieve something that you're happier. You can only be happy if you start building something else in relation to yourself. That, I think, is the transformation.

I imagine that once you get to that point, it's forever.

Exactly. All the people I really admire in this field are still working or did photography until they were dying. Like [Helmut] Newton, [Carlo] Mollino, [Robert] Rauschenberg... You know, Cy Twombly did his best painting and then photography in his later years...

It's very much about the long run...

Totally. I was always trying to think of what the long run is and what is going to make your pictures stay around for longer. You do the same thing over and over and over and over, and that makes the difference. I was thinking about [Giorgio] Morandi, who spent his whole life painting a bottle in his studio. It's not about an obsession – it's about confronting the same subject and trying to find the way of doing it very sharply and personally. That makes a difference.